

An Apple Crate by Rosy_el

Series: [The Sunshine Boy and the Snowflake Girl \[18\]](#)

Category: Stranger Things (TV 2016)

Genre: F/M

Language: English

Characters: Eleven (Stranger Things), Jim "Chief" Hopper, Mike Wheeler, Original Female Character(s)

Status: Completed

Published: 2016-11-10

Updated: 2016-11-10

Packaged: 2022-04-02 00:14:25

Rating: Not Rated

Warnings: No Archive Warnings Apply

Chapters: 1

Words: 1,740

Publisher: archiveofourown.org

Summary:

“Have you ever owned a pet, El?”

Eleven squinted at her, rubbing her palms against her pink corduroy skirt timidly. “A pet?” She asked.

“You know, a cat or dog or rabbit? A pet?” Mrs. Wilk watched El carefully, pursing her lips without realizing it.

The following session, El tentatively pulled the door to Mrs. Wilk’s office open only to be met with a great curly beast panting and licking her hands.

An Apple Crate

November, 1985

“How are you doing, El?”

Mrs. Wilk peered at Eleven over her large purple-rimmed glasses. They made her blue eyes look bulgy and massive but El kind of liked it. She looked like a cartoon. She was tall and probably somewhere in her late fifties, salt-and-pepper hair carefully permed. There was a framed photograph of what looked to be a younger Deborah Wilk on her wedding day, long black hair and big smile, topped off with similar huge glasses. *Pretty*, El thought. A man, her husband, stood beside her, clad in a crisp tux and big moustache. He was a little shorter than Mrs. Wilk, and it made El smile.

El studied the photograph before she answered, tapping her foot restlessly on the floor. “I’m good.”

Debby Wilk raised an eyebrow. “Hm,” she hummed. “All your classes are going well?”

Eleven pulled her eyes away from the glossy frame and met Mrs. Wilk’s enormous blue ones. She nodded.

“What’s your favorite class, El?” Mrs. Wilk had a clipboard on her desk but didn’t write anything down. It made the kids anxious, particularly El. The aging woman had no knowledge of Eleven’s complicated history with clipboards. So she just listened and wrote notes after the young girl had left.

El didn’t hesitate. “Choir.”

Mrs. Wilk smiled. “And why is that?”

“Mike is in that class and he sings pretty...” her cheeks blossomed red and she stumbled to recollect her random confession under the burning of Mrs. Wilk’s small smile, “good. He’s pretty good. He’s okay.” She shrugged. Mike had never shown any interest in singing before that year. But then he suddenly decided to join after looking at

El's school schedule. Ted thought it was ridiculous but Karen was overjoyed. (*"You're going to look so handsome in a suit for the Christmas choir concert, Michael!"*)

Mrs. Wilk only nodded knowingly. El was often fidgety and nervous in these meetings. She had only started coming a few months ago. Though Debby could sense El relaxing and certainly opening up more (i.e. the accidental mentioning of this *Mike* boy) Eleven still visibly struggled in social situations. Debby was told very limited information of the young girl's case, which didn't matter but still bothered her slightly. She was told El had no siblings, which she thought could be a factor in the girl's general discomfort around other kids.

"Have you ever owned a pet, El?"

Eleven squinted at her, rubbing her palms against her pink corduroy skirt timidly. "A pet?" She asked.

"You know, a cat or dog or rabbit? A pet?" Mrs. Wilk watched El carefully, pursing her lips without realizing it.

El's gaze slid down and she stared at the clipboard. Cat. The word sounded sickly familiar. And the clipboard. Suddenly it clicked. Eleven winced and shook her head furiously. "No. No cats."

Mrs. Wilk was taken aback by El's frantic reply, immediately reaching out to press a warm hand on the trembling girl's shoulders. "El, calm down, Sweetheart. No cats, okay?" El blinked and refocused on Mrs. Wilk, breathing in and out deeply, like the counselor had instructed. Mrs. Wilk gazed at El and chewed the tip of her nail thoughtfully. "Maybe you're a dog person, that's all," the woman smiled down at El, who felt simultaneously confused by the statement and calm. "Okay." She nodded to herself. "Okay." A light filled Mrs. Wilk's eyes and El found herself suspicious. "I'll see you next time, El. Have a lovely day, Sweetie."

El did. Will showed her his new paint set and even painted a portrait of her in the Byers' living room. The other boys had an AV club meeting but it was okay. She liked Will.

The following session, El tentatively pulled the door to Mrs. Wilk's office open only to be met with a great curly beast panting and licking her hands.

"Woah!" El squealed, jumping back against the door, slamming it closed. Mrs. Wilk whistled shortly and the big thing drew its tongue away and sat up perfectly straight, long tail thwapping excitedly against Mrs. Wilk's desk.

"Don't worry, she's very nice," Mrs. Wilk knelt down onto the floor and put a hand on the curly thing's back affectionately. El's eyebrows just about shot to her hairline. *She?* "Her name is Wendy. She's a certified therapy and service dog." El stared at the mop of golden curls curiously. Its—*her*, El mentally corrected, mouth was hanging open. The beast looked like she was smiling up at her, panting happily. El shoved her hair behind her ears and felt a strange itch in her fingertips to reach out and touch the big animal.

"She's actually my dog but I bring her sometimes to meet the kids," Mrs. Wilk beckoned El closer, taking the girl's small hand and placing it on Wendy's head. "She's a mix between a Poodle and a Golden Retriever." El stared at her own hand, resting on top of the *dog's* head, and scrunched her nose at the foreign spill of words that had just left Mrs. Wilk's mouth.

"Dog," Eleven whispered, moving her hand slowly from Wendy's head to her neck, petting her curls carefully. Wendy was soft and her curls were bouncy, reminding El of Dustin's coiled head of hair. The dog sniffed El's knuckles, and the fourteen-year-old froze. But Wendy finished her sniffing and licked Eleven's hand kindly, prompting a unexpected laugh from the girl. Mrs. Wilk smiled giddily. This was going precisely as she had imagined it to.

"I'm not a cat person, either." El's vision flicked from Wendy to Mrs. Wilk and she smiled broadly, copying her counselor by sinking to her knees. She patted Wendy's neck and then rubbed both her hands up and down the big dog's shoulders, a gasp leaving her mouth when Wendy licked El across her nose.

They spent the whole session like that: on the floor with Wendy, petting the big, curled creature contentedly. Mrs. Wilk told El all about when Wendy was a puppy and what her favorite treats and toys were. The bell rang sharply at the end of the hour, and El felt an unfamiliar burn in her chest. The dog scrambled up and licked El's cheek. El felt her eyes get prickly as Wendy held a single paw up toward her, like she was telling El to stay and play some more. Her big brown eyes, almost all covered in hanging red curls, watched El. A tear slipped off Eleven's eyelash and the girl brushed it away, still looking at the curiously loving animal. "Bye," she said to Mrs. Wilk quietly, shaking Wendy's paw before slipping reluctantly through the door.

The door clicked closed and Wendy flipped around to stare up at Mrs. Wilk. Debby shook her head and frowned. Then she dialed a number.

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Jim Hopper hadn't expected that sort of call. But the next week, he found himself excitedly smuggling an old cardboard apple crate into El's bedroom a few minutes before she was bound to get home from school.

He closed the door gingerly and then sat on the couch, fumbling with the magazines and school flyers that lay spread on the coffee table, trying to act natural. He perked up at the usual muffled sound of El's chatter as she called goodbye to her friends, propping her beloved bicycle up on the side of the garage and then barging through the door.

"Hi, Dad," she greeted Jim, swinging her backpack off her shoulders and onto the floor. El kicked her keds off and made a move for the kitchen.

"Hey!" Jim spoke gruffly. "You need to put your crap into your room, El! I'm sick of tripping over your backpack right by the doorway!" He feigned a paternally chastising voice, trying his hardest to hide the smug grin that was fighting its way to his scruffy mouth. El groaned softly and marched back into the foyer to collect her things, lips pursed into a frown as she walked to throw them into her bedroom.

The door swung open and smacked the inside wall of her somewhat-tidy room, drawing a tiny cry from the mysterious apple crate El now studied warily. "What's this box doing in—" her voice fell silent and Jim clambered up from his place in the couch, frantically searching for the 'on' button on the bulky video recorder he had managed to hide from El's sight.

Through the recorder, Jim could see El staring inside the crate, hands fidgeting with the hem of her shirt. He smiled into the camera. "What is it, El?"

She swallowed and glanced, trembling, at the camera. "A dog?"

Jim chuckled and set the camera on top of her white dresser, high enough that it would still film well. He sat on the edge of her bed and pulled the inky black puppy out of the box. He held its bottom in his one hand and the puppy's chest with his other. El gazed down at them, unsure of what to do.

"He's yours, El," Jim held the puppy out to El, whose eyes were now trained on her father.

"Mine? He's mine?" She repeated, timidly taking the dog from his hands. The puppy scrambled and clung to the front of her shirt as she hurried to scoop him into her arms.

"He's all yours, honey."

A wet, choked laugh sounded in El's throat. The pup lifted its head to watch El. He was all midnight-colored, shiny black coat and wide, black eyes. The little thing put his wet nose on El's arm and licked her shyly. And then El was crying, warm tears spilling down her cheeks as she laid the puppy down on her bed and laid down right beside him, her face up close to his.

"Oh, honey, don't cry," Jim was nervous from his place on the edge of the bed still but was automatically put at ease as El kissed the dog's head carefully. "What do you want to name him?"

El sat up all at once. "Mike?"

The dog's stark, ebony features brought the pretty black-haired boy

to El's mind, stirring a sudden heat on her neck.

"Oh, I don't think that would be the best idea..." Jim coughed and shook his head at the camera squeamishly.

El drew her lip between her teeth and thought hard. After a minute or so, she pronounced the puppy's name quietly but confidently.

"Benny."

Author's Note:

Wendy was based off my own dog, Russell, who is the goofiest, sweetest, clumsiest, loveliest Goldendoodle I know. He's the reason I go home from college on the weekends--let's be real, here. I apologize to the awesome Cat People out there; I'm allergic so there's a bit of bias and I'm sorry.

Did you like it! I've got some plans to write about the jealousy prompts I've been getting, as far as Mike being jealous of El's friendship with the other boys as well as El being potentially jealous of someone around Mike. So keep an eye out for that and, as always, my deepest gratitude to all those who keep reading this! It's amazing to see my inbox light up with this incredible thoughts and gracious comments. It makes my day. It really does.